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### Citation for published version:

Vlieghe, J 2014, 'Más allá del significado. Merleau-Ponty y Agamben acerca del cuerpo y la educación', *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 21-39.  
<https://doi.org/10.14201/teoredu20142612139>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.14201/teoredu20142612139](https://doi.org/10.14201/teoredu20142612139)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### Published In:

Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria

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ISSN: 1130-3743

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14201/teoredu20142612139>

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF MEANING. MERLEAU-PONTY AND AGAMBEN ON THE BODY AND EDUCATION

*Más allá del significado. Merleau-Ponty y Agamben acerca  
del cuerpo y la educación*

*Au-delà du sens. Merleau-Ponty et Agamben à propos  
du corps et de l'éducation*

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Fecha de recepción: enero de 2014

Fecha de aceptación: abril de 2014

Biblid [(1130-3743) 26, 1-2014, 21-39]

### SUMMARY

In this article I develop a perspective on the interconnectedness of education and corporeality that allows to analyze concrete school practices in a way that has not been explored so far. After briefly explaining why the body is an important issue for educational research, I explore more extensively a school of thought, which goes back to the work of Merleau-Ponty and which has monopolized the way in which we are inclined to think about corporeality and education. I argue that, in the end, this particular perspective doesn't take the body seriously. This is because the body is reduced to an instrument, and because the body always appears as a source of meaning. Therefore we run the risk to pay no attention to potentially relevant dimensions of corporeal life that resists human intentionality and any attempt to render the body functional. In order to develop an alternative approach that takes seriously the

non-expressive and non-functional body, I turn to the ideas Agamben has formulated in connection with gestures and the potentiality of movement. Gestures concern a repertoire of bodily action/experience that shows in an immediate way what it means that we are creatures of possibility. Elaborating this idea, I concentrate on specific occurrences and practices in the world of education during which we literally coincide with our non-expressive and non-functional bodies, and during which a strong experience of potentiality is granted. In this way it may be argued that certain bodily practices are in and of themselves educationally relevant.

*Key words:* education, corporeality, corporeal experience, gestures, Merleau-Ponty, Agamben.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo desarrolla una perspectiva sobre la interconectividad entre educación y corporalidad con la cual es posible analizar prácticas escolares concretas en una manera hasta ahora no explorada. Después de proveer una breve explicación acerca de por qué el cuerpo es una cuestión importante en la investigación educativa, este artículo explora más detenidamente una escuela de pensamiento que se remonta al trabajo de Merleau-Ponty, la misma que ha monopolizado la forma en la cual nos inclinamos a pensar la relación entre corporalidad y educación. Se sostiene que, al fin y al cabo, dicha perspectiva no hace justicia a la importancia del cuerpo, porque reduce el cuerpo a un mero instrumento y porque el cuerpo siempre aparece como una fuente de significado. De ahí que se corre el riesgo de no prestar atención a dimensiones de la vida corporal potencialmente relevantes, aquellas que resisten la intencionalidad humana así como también cualquier intento de convertir el cuerpo en una cuestión funcional/operativa. Con el fin de desarrollar un enfoque alternativo que toma en serio y trata el cuerpo como un ente no expresivo y no funcional, este artículo recurre a las ideas acerca de los gestos y la potencialidad de movimiento formuladas por Agamben. Los gestos se refieren a un repertorio de acciones y experiencias corporales que dejan ver de una manera inmediata qué significa que seamos «criaturas de posibilidad». Desarrollando esta idea, este artículo se centra en acontecimientos y prácticas específicas en el quehacer educativo, durante las cuales coincidimos literalmente con nuestros cuerpos no expresivos/funcionales, y durante las cuales emerge una fuerte experiencia de potencialidad. De esta manera se puede sostener que ciertas prácticas corporales son en y por sí mismas educacionalmente relevantes.

*Palabras clave:* educación, corporalidad, experiencia corporal, gestos, Merleau-Ponty, Agamben.

## SOMMAIRE

Dans cet article je développe un point de vue sur l'interdépendance de l'éducation et de la corporéité qui permet d'analyser des pratiques scolaires d'une manière qui n'a pas été explorée jusqu'ici. Après avoir expliqué brièvement pourquoi le corps est un sujet important pour la recherche en éducation, j'explore plus

en détail une école de pensée, qui remonte à l'œuvre de Merleau-Ponty et qui a monopolisé la manière dont nous sommes enclins à concevoir le rôle de la corporéité dans l'éducation. Je soutiens que, à la fin, ce point de vue particulier ne prend pas le corps au sérieux. C'est parce que le corps est réduit à un instrument et parce que le corps apparaît toujours comme une source de sens. Par conséquent, nous courons le risque de ne prêter aucune attention aux dimensions potentiellement pertinents de la vie corporelle qui résistent à l'intentionnalité humaine et à toute tentative de rendre le corps fonctionnel. Afin de développer une approche alternative qui prend au sérieux l'organisme non-expressif et non-fonctionnel, je me tourne vers certaines idées qu'Agamben a formulées au sujet de «gestes» et de la potentialité de mouvement. Les gestes concernent un répertoire d'action et d'expérience qui montre de façon immédiate ce que veut dire que nous sommes des êtres de possibilité. Développant cette idée, je me concentre sur les événements et les pratiques spécifiques dans le monde de l'éducation au cours desquelles nous coïncident littéralement avec nos corps non-expressifs et non-fonctionnels, et au cours desquelles une forte expérience de potentialité est accordée. De cette façon, je soutiens que certaines pratiques corporelles ont en elles-mêmes une signification intrinsèquement pédagogique.

*Mots clés:* éducation, corporalité, expérience corporelle, gestes, Merleau-Ponty, Agamben.

In this article I develop a new perspective on the interconnectedness of education and corporeality. This alternative view should be taken as a criticism towards the dominant ways in which the body is dealt with in current educational research, and especially the body-centred approach that originated in the work of the French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work counts as a point of reference one cannot bypass (*cf.* Bressler, 2004). Going against this school of thought, which defines the educational relevance of corporeality in terms of the meaning-generating capacities of the body, I defend an idea of body-centred pedagogy which is interested in the body as far as it has nothing to do with signification, expression of meaning or intentionality. With the help of the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, I defend the view that we should take this non-expressive dimension of corporeal life more seriously than the Merleau-Pontian approach allows for. Moreover, on the basis of his analysis of gestures in terms of «pure means», I argue that the body might have *in and of itself* educational significance (rather than that the body should serve educational goals that are external to it). This particular, Agambenian, perspective will allow to analyse concrete occurrences and practices that bring into presence the physical side of existence within schools and pedagogical institutions. Before I try to show how our thinking on the role of the body in and for education might gain from embracing this perspective, I first analyse the ways in which the body is dealt with in education and in educational research.

## 1. THE CORPOREAL TURN IN EDUCATION

Schools and other educational institutions are, at least to an often heard analysis (e.g. O'Farrel *et al.*, 2000; Estola & Elbaz-Luwish, 2003; Bresler, 2004; Macintyre Latta & Buck, 2008), places where people interact with one another without fully realizing that they are also embodied creatures. It is a common belief that this follows from deep-seated prejudices regarding the nature of humankind and the true aims of teaching and learning. For a very long time we have cherished the idea that we are essentially our minds and that the body is solely a container for this mental substance. The concrete organization of school life and fleshing out of curricula reflected perfectly this dualist account. Education was believed to be aimed at developing cognitive capacities, and this implied that the body was only considered to be an irrelevant dimension, or a nuisance that interferes with the real objectives of education (*cf.*: Watkins, 2007; Zembylas, 2007). In view of these opinions, the body became the object of repression and drill (youngsters should learn to concentrate on math problems instead of thinking about food and sex all day long), as well as of hygienic and orthopaedic measures (youngsters should learn to follow a sound diet or to keep themselves physically in shape, in view of the idea that a sound mind requires a sound body, *cf.* Deacon, 2005).

As the result of a paradigm-shift in the humanities, it has become more and more evident to say that, if we leave the body out of consideration, we run the risk of taking no notice of potentially significant dimensions. Amongst the pace-makers of this call for a body-centred pedagogy we find figures such as John Dewey (1938) and Gilbert Ryle (1945). Ryle, for instance, introduced the opposition between *knowing that* and *knowing how*. With this he showed that many important things we learn cannot be explained in terms of *mere cognition*. Much intelligent behaviour does not follow from an intellectual grasping of reality (e.g. *knowing that* there are certain rules one should obey when entering in a rational dialogue). It rather results from embodied habits and susceptibilities, which pupils can only be said to possess when they are actually capable to demonstrate that they *know how* to participate in such a dialogue (e.g. that they pose the right kinds of questions, i.e. critical interventions that are fair and square, but never rude or deceitful). *Knowing how* requires a kind of sensitivity that cannot be intellectuality fathomed: it resides as it where in the spontaneous responses our (speaking and thinking) bodies have become accustomed to give. Therefore teaching and learning methods that take the body into account are required.

The most important impetus to this «corporeal turn» is however the work of Merleau-Ponty (Peters, 2004). More than anyone else Merleau-Ponty (2002) has wiped the floor with the intellectualist and dualist prejudices that stood for a very long time in the way of taking seriously that we also *are* our bodies. Defending a position that is even more radical than Ryle's, Merleau-Ponty claims that *all* meaningful human behaviour has its roots in embodied practices. Even very abstract ways of relating to the world, e.g. on the basis of mathematical concepts, actually presuppose the body (Moore & Yamamoto, 1988; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). We prefer

for instance a decimal system because mathematics originated in the embodied practice of counting on ten fingers. And, we stick to this system even if, for sound theoretical reasons, it might turn out that a hexadecimal system is much more efficient. Therefore, mathematics has a practical and embodied ground. This means that it is the body that shapes the mind (*cf.* Gallagher, 2005).

This is to be explained by the fact that the body has its own *pre-reflexive intentionality*. Our bodies relate in and of themselves in meaningful ways to the world, and this happens without any support of conscious activity (*cf.* Herbert Dreyfus's analysis of «skilful coping», Dreyfus, 1991). Mental representation is no necessary condition for being able to grab a pen that is lying on our desktop: the body *itself* has knowledge of the geography of the desk we are working on – just in the way that the body knows the distribution of the keys on the querty-finger-board (whilst our «mind» doesn't). The body is therefore no inert vehicle for the mind, but is *itself* a source of meaning and even forms a condition of possibility for relating to the world in a meaningful way. That is also why Merleau-Ponty (2002, 137) claims that the basic modality of consciousness is not «I think that», but «I can». It is the practical relation between ourselves and the world we can put at use that forms the very basis of *all* intentional behaviour. In the end, all conscious activities find their origin in the actualization of concrete projects the embodied subject («corps-sujet») undertakes.

In his later work Merleau-Ponty (1979) even argues that human beings are never separate and self-identical entities: we are – as bodies – fully «intertwined» with the materiality of the world and of others. This also means that the whole of reality itself should be conceived in a «corporeal» way (something that can feel and be felt, rather than an inert material substance). In this context, he introduces notions like «intercorporeality» and «flesh of the world» to refer to this body-like foundation of everything that exists. Even if this claim might at first sight seem far-fetched, Merleau-Ponty only describes at a phenomenological level (i.e. at the level of what we actually experience) what in more recent times has been discovered by «hard» natural science. The idea that consciousness is fundamentally embedded in the «flesh of the world» follows, amongst other things, from the observation that we perceive others' behaviour *immediately*, i.e. without first having to reflect upon it or to interpret visual stimuli. In their pioneering neurophysiological research regarding «mirror neurons», Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004) have supported this view, because they discovered that the specific parts of our brain that are responsible for the perception of other people's motor behaviour are actually identical to the very neurological basis for the execution of our own movements and gestures. This discovery accounts for the spontaneous inclination to imitate each other's behaviour and for the foundational role of mimesis in primary learning processes.

Merleau-Ponty's ideas have proven to be quite influential in the field of educational theory. For instance, next to the possibility to rethink in a much more body-centred way the practice of science education (Pozzer-Ardenghi & Roth, 2007), or physical education (Whitehead, 2007), this line of thought also granted alternative

approaches to less obvious domains, such as dealing with students suffering from mental disorders (Stinson, 2003, 157-158) or with developing social justice courses. In regard with the last, Sherry Shapiro (1999) uses Merleau-Ponty's ideas in order to criticize the standard way in which schools deal with issues such as racism or homophobia. As a rule, teachers restrict courses to merely transmitting knowledge about conditions that lead to a discriminatory attitude. This has, however, turned out to be a very inefficient pedagogic approach (Hogan, 2006). Social justice education will only be successful if teachers appeal to «physically lived-through» feelings one experiences when belonging to a minority and being offended for that reason. To Shapiro, we should come to see that intolerant attitudes result from a corporeal insensitivity towards discrimination. As long as one hasn't gone through a bodily lived sensation of being discriminated, issues such as racism, sexism or homophobia have only little meaning, in the same manner that (some) colours have no meaning to people afflicted with colour blindness (*cf.* Shapiro, 1999). Inviting a xenophobic student to change her attitudes on the basis of rational arguments alone is as pointless as trying to explain the difference between sour and sweet to someone born without taste buds.

In a similar way, Richard Shusterman holds a plea for «somaesthetics» in education (Shusterman, 2004, 57). He argues for instance that the aversion vis-à-vis mathematical formulae many students share, as well as xenophobia are *habits* that result from concrete (traumatic) events in one's personal life. These often concern *deeply embodied* experiences, accompanied by tight muscle contractions. This gives cause to a conditioned behavioural pattern to react in an inhibitory way to specific situations (complex formulae or people with a different skin colour). A successful social justice education should take this insight into account and should stimulate students to detect having these corporeal feelings, offering the possibility to retrain these (undesirable) habits of conduct. I should point out that Shusterman also raises objections to the Merleau-Pontian approach, because it opposes, in his reading, reflection and lived experience in an exclusionary way, preventing the possibility of a rich «lived corporeal reflection» (Shusterman, 2005, 165). I suggest to read his remarks as a conceptual refinement, rather than as a real criticism of Merleau-Ponty's basic intuitions. Anyway, in my view, this way of thinking illustrates very well how a (broader) Merleau-Pontian framework has turned corporeality into a major educational issue.

## 2. THE REDUCTION OF CORPOREALITY TO A MEANING-CONSTITUTING RESOURCE

In this paper, I would like to rise a more fundamental criticism to the Merleau-Pontian take on educational issues that is completely different from the point Shusterman brings forward. This school of thought claims to have taken away the burden of a long standing intellectualist and dualist tradition in educational theory and research, and to have set the body free. On a closer look, however, there are two reasons for doubting whether this approach is *really* interested in



a prioritization and emancipation of the body. First, the body is considered to be educationally relevant, but *only in so far* it supports established goals of schooling and education. Corporeality appears, to this approach, as a factor of importance *because* it is a helpful tool for optimizing the outcome of educational processes: after having discovered that the body is a source of meaning itself, educationalists are well advised putting it at use to impart knowledge or to influence attitudes in a more efficient way. The body is thus regarded as a *resource* we didn't realize to possess and as an *instrument* for achieving educational objectives that in the end have nothing to do with corporeality itself. Therefore, in my view, the body has a functional and therefore *only a secondary role* to fulfil.

To be clear, I am not denying that a more body-centred math training or social justice education, as proposed by the Merleau-Pontian school of thought, might be more efficient than traditional approaches. I am also not claiming that this approach is unimportant or irrelevant to educational theory. My main concern is that this particular way of looking rules out the possibility that the body might be *in and of itself* educationally significant. More specifically, I argue in the second half of this article that, at the precise moment at which the body can no longer be reduced to a resource or an instrument, we might possibly find that the body has an intrinsically educational meaning.

Before going deeper into this, I have to discuss a second objection to the belief that the Merleau-Pontian line of thought really prioritizes the body. This view essentially defends a more body-centred approach on the basis of the argument that the body possesses a pre-reflexive *intentionality* and that it is the source of all *meaning-constitution*. This is to say that the significance of corporeity is understood in *exactly the same terms* that were essential to the intellectualist and dualist view. In doing this, Jean-Luc Nancy comments, «we turn the body into a soul in the traditional sense: the signifying body, the expressive body [...]. In saying this, we put the body in the place of the soul or the spirit» (Nancy, 2008, 133). Therefore, the body is regarded as (educationally) important *as far as* it is capable of performing precisely these activities that for a long time were supposed to be the privilege of the solemn life of mind. Therefore I argue that this view is in the end still relying on the account of humankind it was supposed to be critical to, and that it is therefore contradictory.

In this article I am not only concerned with pointing out to the inconsistency of the Merleau-Pontian school of thought. I also want to show that this particular perspective ignores a way of dealing with corporeality in a much more straightforward manner and that it therefore also excludes to take into account possibly relevant dimensions of corporeal life. In my view, the Merleau-Pontian approach imposes a false dilemma: we are asked *either* to comply with superseded opinions like body-mind dualism *or* we have to accept the far more plausible idea that the body is itself a carrier of meaning and that it therefore is educationally important. If one has to choose between one of these two alternatives, it almost goes without saying that the second option is preferable. Nonetheless, in this article I try to set a



step further, arguing that there are situations and practices in education that deserve our attention *because* they bring into presence a body that stands apart from the realm of signification and intentionality, and moreover that this body contradicts any attempt to render it functional (which, as I argued, is ultimately the case within a Merleau-Pontian approach). To substantiate these claims, I have to make a detour via Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the nature of human action, and more precisely some ideas he developed in an essay entitled «Notes on gestures» (2000).

### 3. THE BODY «ON THE OTHER SIDE OF MEANING»: AGAMBEN'S PHILOSOPHY OF GESTURES

In this text Agamben conceives the notion of «pure means», referring to a register of human activity that can never be reduced to a meaning constituting resource. It concerns a form of action which cancels out all human intentionality, and which is emptied of all purpose. To fully grasp this notion, Agamben asks his readers to reconsider the classical, Aristotelian categorization of human activity as either «praxis» (activities that are intrinsically worthwhile) or «poiesis» (activities that have their meaning outside themselves). Whereas the first category refers to a behaviour whose end lies in itself (autotelic activity), the second category refers to a behaviour that is a means that addresses an end (instrumental activity). When we walk, for instance, we are inclined to consider this activity either as in itself meaningful (e.g. walking for walking's sake on a sunny afternoon, without any further goal in mind) or as meaningful in relation to an extrinsic goal (e.g. to have one's daily walk in order to keep fit). At times one and the same activity might of course be intrinsically gratifying *and* serving a purpose that exists independently from what one is doing. However, when we stick to this classification, we run the risk that any behaviour that is devoid of a concrete purpose is immediately considered as «praxis». And this might preclude the possibility that we take notice of a third way to relate to what we are doing, which exceeds the Aristotelian scheme and which consists in experiencing our actions as «means without end» or «pure means» (Agamben, 2000, 58).

With this phraseology Agamben alludes to activities that are potentially aimed at the realization of a goal (and that are therefore *not* autotelic), but that remain temporarily devoid of any purpose whatsoever. More positively formulated: because they never pass into actuality, they succeed in keeping their potential character intact. Or, even more sharply phrased: these activities put on display «the potential to not-do», i.e. «the potential not to pass into actuality» (Agamben, 1999, 180). This expression should be taken in its ambiguity. What is at stake is *at the same time* the full *impossibility* to actualize one's abilities, *and* the opportunity for experiencing *potential as pure potential* (and nothing else). This is to say that the suspension of teleology allows for a peculiar thing to happen, viz. that we experience in a very direct way *that we are creatures of possibility*. This might seem at first sight a far-fetched and even a contradictory idea, and therefore a more elaborate analysis is required.

Consider the following case of gesture. Striking one's own chin when attending a lecture is usually not intrinsically gratifying («praxis»), neither is it necessarily expressive of one's state of mind («poiesis»). Of course, this behaviour *might have been* expressing boredom or deep concentration, and therefore *might have been* a purposeful means (viz. an act of body-language). But, this is exactly the point. Because this type of activity is executed for no particular reason, and therefore disinvested with meaning and functionality, it precisely has the capacity to show something that is always presupposed in every movement we make, but that also normally remains implicit – viz. *that gestures might convey meaning*. When disinvested with outer and inner teleology, our striking gesture is entirely displayed «as means» and nothing beyond that. It has become «pure gesture» (*ibid.*, 79). More specifically, it has become *pure communicability* (*ibid.*, 52), the «pure possibility» of communicating itself (*ibid.*, 80), instead of a concrete act of communication (that it, of course, potentially was). It concerns not the ordinary experience that we can do *this* or that we can do *that* (i.e. that we may express boredom or fascination by performing a striking gesture), but the more originary experience that we *can* – seeking out with this last formulation the limits of the English language, as it obviously isn't allowed to state this in a grammatically proper way, see Agamben (2011). To experience *ability as such* is only granted at the moment that the possibility to actualize *concrete abilities* is held in suspension.

A similar thing might occur when we catch ourselves making doodles, i.e. the nonsensical drawings we produce when our attention is wholly focused on another difficult task (which typically takes place when we are on the telephone and happen to have pen and paper at our disposal). Here again, the relationship between what we do and any defined purpose is neutralized. And the same applies to the literally practice of «automatic writing», as explored by Gertrude Stein, which consists in isolating the technical art of writing from meaning formation via acts of distraction (Will, 2001, 170).

Of course, one might easily explain away all these phenomena by interpreting them as conveyors of a deeper, unconscious meaning. When we are performing a difficult task that demands our full attention, unconscious processes (or what psychoanalysis calls «primary processes») might take possession over other registers of behaviour that temporarily escape our control. And so, gestures, doodles and unintentionally composed poems might reveal what is taking place in the non-accessible parts of our psychic system. Like dreams, they express what we really fear and desire (without being conscious of it) and thus possess, in spite of their seemingly nonsensical character, a deeper meaning. When we are constantly drawing sharp angles or arrows when talking with someone on the phone, this might reveal an unconscious, aggressive attitude towards her. Following this logic of divulgence, our actions can be said to express well-defined intentions after all, and therefore they should be considered as «poietic» activity, in the Aristotelian sense of that word.

However, just like the Merleau-Pontian school of thought I criticized in the last paragraph, this kind of interpretation is excluding the possibility of a way to

relate to corporeal behaviour that is «on the other side of meaning» (*cf.* Agamben, 1999, 78). It is as if everything the body is capable of doing *must* have a clear significance. And therefore, if we don't succeed in providing a conscious intention to make our behaviour intelligible, we are tempted to construct an unconscious system of meaning-production behind it (*cf.* Agamben, 2011). So, Nancy's criticism to Merleau-Ponty might equally apply to psychoanalytical explanations: «We put the body in the place of the soul or the spirit» (Nancy, 2008, 133). Otherwise stated: *we do not take the body seriously.*

Moreover, if we limit the body inside the confines of intentionality and signification, we might miss the whole point Agamben is trying to make, viz. that precisely when our bodies «act» in a non-expressive way, an experience of «pure» ability is granted (*cf.* Agamben, 1999, 177-184). This is to say that we may *experience* that we are creatures of possibility – instead of *inferring* this by reflecting upon our successful (expressive) actions. It is against this background that we must understand that gestures, the drawing of doodles or automatic writing might be «pure means» (rather than «means in view of an end» or «pure ends»): because they solely exist in moving, drawing or writing *as such* (rather than in moving, drawing or writing to express *this* or *that*) they precisely show, in a very literal sense, that we *can* write, *can* draw or *can* express meaning in movement. Finding ourselves – as non-expressive bodies – «at the other side of meaning», we might immediately experience what meaning-creation is all about. To refer to this, Agamben uses the term «potentiality» (*ibid.*).

Because the expressions «pure» and «on the other side» might suggest things that have nothing to do with an Agambenian point of view, it is important to make some clarifications. To begin with, «pure» is *not* to be understood in a *romantic* sense. It is not as if we are allowed a blissful moment during which we return to a more authentic or edenic state of existence that is uncontaminated by the impositions of culture and convention. «Pure» is solely meant as a descriptive category, referring to a possibility that is always structurally (but most of the times not experientially) present. It is merely to say that the disconnection between activity and concrete meaning or purpose (displaying an activity as «means without end») allows us to experience something that otherwise remains only implicit. At the same time, this experience doesn't function as a transcendental principle or ground (See Agamben, 2000, 116): potentiality is not about the (silent) agreement with something that thereupon makes our actions possible. There is nothing behind or beyond this experience. Nonetheless, for this very experience to happen, conditions are required that at first sight seems contrary to it, viz. that we no longer can do *this* or *that* (i.e. that we no longer can express meaning through our movement, drawing or writing). Therefore Agamben says that potentiality is fundamentally also *impotentiality*: «[b]eings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential» (Agamben, 1999, 185). What is demanded is thus, paradoxically as it might sound, that we find ourselves in a condition that prevents the actualization of our possibilities.

However, (im)potentiality should not solely be defined in terms of a *lack* of possibility: in the end it concerns a *positive* thing to experience, viz. what it means to say «I can», in the most profound sense of this utterance. Analogously, the expression «at the other side of meaning» should not be taken as referring to a situation in which everything becomes meaningless. What is at stake is that we find ourselves beyond the whole opposition between «meaningful» and «meaningless».

To make a further clarification, a philosophy of potentiality should not be confused with an assumption that is essential to the Merleau-Pontian view I discussed above. Defying dualist and intellectualist prejudices, this school of thought argues, as I explained, that the basic modality of consciousness is not to be situated at a cognitive level («I think that»), but at the level of a *pragmatic* relation between ourselves and the world, and more precisely that it consists in the bodily lived experience that we are able to cope skilfully with the world and to realize our projects, even in the absence of mental representation («I can») (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 137; cf. Dreyfus, 1991). This is to say that in fact the most abstract activities should be reduced, according to Merleau-Ponty, to the successful interaction between our bodies and things-at-hand, as the example concerning the origins of the decimal system shows. Potentiality, in the Agambenian sense, is something quite different: it is precisely at the moment that we no longer succeed in bringing concrete possibilities to actualization («I cannot»), that we might experience what it means «that we are capable» in the first place. Again, potentiality is fundamentally the «potential not to» (Agamben, 1999, 215).

#### 4. FROM NON-EXPRESSIVE BODILY ACTION TO FULLY CORPOREAL EXPERIENCE

The argument I developed in the last paragraph might seem to have taken us far away from the issue that is central to this article, viz. a way to think and speak about the educational meaning of the body which surpasses both a traditional, dualist framework and the Merleau-Pontian perspective I criticized – i.e. a view on the interrelationship between the corporeality and education, that focuses on the body in so far as it is emptied of all expressive intentionality and freed of any possible instrumentalisation. Nonetheless, I will precisely argue that a further elaboration of an Agambenian perspective allows to develop such an alternative view on the body. Therefore, in the following part of this article, I carry on my analysis of bodily action in terms of (im)potentiality. At the same time I leave behind «exceptional» cases like gestures or doodles, and turn to situations and practices that make us fully *coincide* with our physical bodies (our «flesh»), e.g. being taken, collectively, with a fit of laughter, or performing repetitive exercise (callisthenics). In this last case one becomes absorbed by the rhythm of the muscular movements one performs, to such a degree that one loses oneself amidst an aggregation of moving bodies.

These two examples are interesting because they concern a form of bodily experience, which is even more «direct» than what might happen during automatic

writing or the execution of gestures. Roaring with laughter or performing rhythmical activities, we find ourselves *completely* «on the other side of meaning», because the *only* sense our actions have here is that we affirm to be «entirely flesh». This is not so much a plea to reintroduce dualism – far from that: I am not interested in situations in which we are confronted with some truth about ourselves as embodied beings, e.g. that we are *merely* flesh and bone. I rather want to take Merleau-Ponty's own idea that we are intertwined with the «flesh of the world» literally, and analyse moments in which we are *wholly* flesh and experience this in an *affirmative* way. This is to say that there is no distance involved between a part of ourselves that apprehends some truth about another part of ourselves. It is not about us having an *experience of the body*, i.e. something which forces us to recognize some insight *about* humanity (e.g. that in the confrontation with sickness and decay, we have to accept the ultimate vanity of existence). What is at stake is an immediate *corporeal experience*, during which the only thing that matters is that we are flesh and that we experience this to the full.

In the remaining part of this article I go deeper into the examples I just mentioned, in order to make clear why the non-expressive and non-functional body is also *educationally* relevant. This is far from evident to understand. Consider first the case of roaring with laughter. This concerns an occurrence that regularly takes place whenever people are gathered, e.g. in institutions like schools. But, this also concerns a phenomenon that as a rule is dealt with in a negative and even oppressive manner (schools might be defined regimes devised for banning this very phenomenon). This condescending attitude is completely in line with the traditional, Cartesian, perspective on the body, which regards laughter as a corporeal inconvenience that thwarts concentration and upsets the pedagogical order. However, especially in the last decades – together with the Merleau-Pontian turn to corporeality – there is a growing attention for laughter among educationalists. This is to say that some have come to appreciate laughter in school, because it turns out to be an unexpected resource we should put at use: it has been recently discovered that laughter successfully furthers motivation and creativity, that it has a positive impact on social cohesion and contributes to a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, that it gives opportunity to discover what really is on pupils' minds, etc. (See Gruntz-Stoll & Rissland, 2002). In that sense laughter might be considered as a valuable educational tool after all.

Although I applaud this growing interest for the issue of laughter, this approach is quite distinct from my own take on the matter. This is because this approach – analogously to the so called body-centred Merleau-Pontian school of thought – implies in the end a far going *instrumentalization* of this phenomenon: laughter in school is only taken into account because it contributes to objectives that have nothing to do with laughter *per se*. Moreover, what is really appreciated is humour and amusement (and thus that which is being laughed with) and not laughter in so far it is also a strongly *corporeal experience*, i.e. the spasmodic, uncontrollable and sometimes unstoppable contractions of midriff, facial musculature and vocal

chords. Just like in the case of explaining away automatic writing or gestures as expressions of deeper meanings, laughter is thus *reduced* to something «on this side of meaning» (cf. Gordon, 2010). Again, the body is not taken seriously. Therefore, I propose to pursue yet another line of thought and to concentrate on laughter as a *fully bodily experience* – i.e. as an experience in which we coincide with our flesh and which precludes any expression of meaning or rendering it functional. At the same time, I will argue that precisely this laughter, «on the other side of meaning», is educationally relevant.

To be clear on this point, I am not dealing here with phenomena such as smiling or scorning, but with situations in which laughter just happens and in which we are literally overpowered by it. In that sense one might say that laughter consists in a response that is beyond our control and that renders us completely «out of position» (Plessner, 1961). While we laugh, we no longer answer the situation we find ourselves in as self-contained subjects in control over existence. It is rather as if «the body answers in our place» (*ibid.*, 155). It isn't necessary to know why we laugh (laughter is very contagious as such) and, furthermore, it isn't necessary that we share something identical with the persons with whom we laugh together, even not a common language (and that is why laughter is still something different than humour, which always presupposes a shared set of presuppositions). The only thing that matters is that those who laugh surrender together to a corporeal experience. When we are taken by laughter we experience to coincide entirely with our bodies, and to such a degree that we live a moment beyond intentionality and «on the other side of meaning».

Seen from this perspective, communal laughter poses a nuisance and even a threat to any existing societal order. This is because as a rule social existence is ordered according to a system of clearly defined identities and roles: normally, we relate (or do not relate) to others on the basis of similarities and differences qua social position. We interact with one another *as* man and wife, parents and children, teachers and students, etc. Furthermore, we normally feel that we belong together *because* we speak the same language, share similar values and beliefs, etc. Laughter contradicts all this: we undergo together a corporeal experience *in spite of* any logic that binds us to fixed identities and positions. We can literally find ourselves together in laughter with *anyone*. This might explain why laughter is frequently sensed as inconvenient, especially in highly organized contexts that rest on clear distinctions between social positions. Laughter invalidates any societal regime and renders us *equal*. And so, within schools, which always impose clear hierarchies between teachers and students, laughter appears as a nuisance. But, this is all the more true because the school also tends to define its own calling in terms of a preparation of an older generation for a future social life, securing in this way individual and collective welfare. This objective is based on the idea that our living together *should* be organized according to well-distinguished identities and positions and that its role precisely consists in selecting pupils in view of their capabilities and in order to get the right woman at the right place in future society.



Therefore it is intelligible why laughter in school either gets banished and suppressed, or – if it is allowed to take place – is put at use for realizing established pedagogical goals, giving it a safe destination. The occurrence of laughter *as such* poses a great danger to the pedagogical and societal order, and that is why it needs to be tamed somehow. Nonetheless, I believe that it is of a great importance to concentrate on laughter such as it is, i.e. as an *entirely corporeal experience*. Negatively formulated, this means that, when we roar with laughter, we undergo (as pupils and teachers), *in spite of* any difference in social position, gender, sexual orientation, political interests, ethnicity, etc. an experience during which the only thing that matters is that we are «flesh».

More positively formulated, what is at stake in this experience is *that there is no necessity in any existing order of things and that all can begin anew*. It is my claim that corporeal experience has – precisely for this reason – in and of itself *educational* value: while laughing, we might directly experience the possibility of an individual and collective life that is not regulated by any established societal order. Moreover, corporeal experience has educational value *in and of itself*, because the possibility of this radically open future is sensed *in the flesh itself* (rather than that corporeal experiences are useful instruments *for* the realization of social justice, like in the cases I analysed in the beginning of this article). All this means that education is no longer defined, as is usually the case, in a conservative way, i.e. as a mere preparation of the young for an existing society. On the contrary, the educational dimension of corporeality precisely resides in the potential of interrupting an established order of things. But again, this is merely a negative definition. I will, in the following paragraph, defend that what is at stake can be analysed as an immediate and profound experience of *potentiality*.

## 5. (IM)POTENTIALITY AND THE INTRINSICALLY EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BODY

Here I return to the thought of Agamben. His philosophy of (im)potentiality can be read as a criticism of a limited and simplistic conception of what it means that we, as humans, are creatures of possibility and that a true change in the course of history can take place (*cf.* Lewis, 2011). This simplistic, though quite commonly endorsed view consists in defining ability in terms of the mere actualization of possibilities (i.e. that the impossibility to realize ourselves is absent). This is to say that we define ourselves as subjects with a substantive identity and with an interest in a clear position vis-à-vis other subjects (Agamben, 1999, 180). This is however also to say that all transformation is actually reduced to a mere continuation of something that already exists. We are not *really* changed (as subjects).

For this to happen, an experience of self-expropriation is required. This is the most fundamental reason why for Agamben potentiality is eventually *impotentiality*. We experience that we are creatures of possibility, but at the same time we experience that this potential is *no private possession*. It belongs to no



one in particular. Therefore, the subject of the experience of (im)potentiality is not referring to a subject in the traditional sense of the word (i.e. a foundational principle behind that which we experience). Experiencing potentiality never results in a strengthening of our subject-position, in the sense that we might appropriate the concrete possibilities we bring into actualization as a sort of personal possession or gain. On the contrary, the very possibility to relate to ourselves as private and self-possessed beings (as subjects, traditionally defined) is temporarily suspended. Thus, it concerns a *desubjectivating experience*. This probably points to the most crucial difference between Agamben's view and a traditional, phenomenological approach like Merleau-Ponty's (which, although it stresses the relation world-subject rather than presupposing a «closed subjectivity», nevertheless leaves the private and self-possessed character of the subject intact, cf. Visker, 1993).

To make this last point clear, I turn to the second example of a school practice that brings into presence the *non-expressive* and *non-functional* side of corporeality and that, from an Agambenian point of view, might be analysed as having intrinsically *educational* relevance: the performance of the most elementary calisthenics (stretching, bending, rotating the various body parts), in group and under the command of a teacher who imposes a fixed rhythm. More often than not, this activity is disregarded, because it is felt to be meaningless, dreary and even unpedagogical: repetitive gymnastics seems to be merely aimed at the imposition of harsh discipline, taking away all intrinsic motivation in students. Or, if this kind of callisthenics still has a place in the physical education-curriculum, it has at the most an instrumental value, i.e. this practice serves as a mere preparation for things that really matter, such as sport and athletics (during which students might express and realize themselves in movement).

Nevertheless, I would argue that this kind of practice precisely grants a strongly corporeal experience that opens a non-destined future. Because of its basic, repetitive and collective character, the practice of callisthenics suspends the possibility that we relate to what we are doing from an intentional point of view (it is precisely at this point that callisthenics is different from the far more popular activities that are deployed in today's physical education courses, like sport, athletics, dance, etc.). In a sense we entirely coincide with our moving bodies. Returning a last time to Agamben, this means that the movements we make are experienced as «pure means». Movement is thus experienced *as movement* – and not as something we might appropriate as private subjects (like when we realize ourselves by scoring a goal during soccer, setting a record as a short distance runner, or expressing our deeper self during free-style dance). Movement is experienced as a potential that belongs to all and no one in special (and therefore it is, again, fundamentally a case of impotentiality). The only thing that matters is that we *can* move.

For this reason it also seems essential that (just like in the case of laughter, which normally isn't a solitary event) this educational way to raise the body is a collective practice. Performing callisthenics, we find ourselves amidst an aggregation of bodies that all act the same at precisely the same moment: in this way the

possibility is granted that this practice is concerned with *movement as such*, rather than with the individual that expresses his- or herself *through movement*. And, at the same time, moving *together* we might sense a form of communality that is not organized according to the distribution of roles and position our social life has in the present.

A similar case could be made for other forms of exercising and practising. Even if it concerns things that have at first sight little to do with the body, such as rehearsing multiplication tables or the alphabet in group, it might still be argued that it concerns a typical «school» activity (meaning that it is unlikely that we do such things on our own at home or during on-line learning-activities), and thus a collective activity of bodies gathered between the four walls of the classroom. I have no place to go deeper into this here, but by focusing on these practices as collective, *bodily* activities, they might also be analysed as concerned with experiencing potentiality (in this case, the potentiality of counting or spelling), rather than immediately disregarding them as obsolete practices, which mostly happens today – especially in view of the dominant Merleau-Pontian framework that aims at setting the expressive body free from the burden of disciplinary practices.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to develop a new perspective on the issue of education and corporeality, arguing that a certain form of bodily experience has intrinsically educational significance. More precisely, I have argued that the manner in which the body is dealt with in most educational research on this topic doesn't take the body seriously in the end: it is only valued positively insofar it is a carrier of meaning. This is to say that the body, to this particular perspective, is *only* educationally relevant *if* it is an expressive body (which, in spite of Merleau-Ponty's stressing of the «pre-reflexive», remains understood on the model of the intentional mind). Moreover, this approach amounts to an instrumentalisation of corporeality in view of established pedagogical goals that have nothing to do with the body *per se*. In view of the emancipatory force corporeal experience has vis-à-vis any ordering of communal existence, this tendency to render the body functional becomes intelligible: the body is precisely put at use for safeguarding the societal order (to which schools traditionally offer a preparation). I have also tried to give – with the help of Agamben – a much more positive reading of this interruptive force of corporeal experience. Being entirely «flesh» – i.e. coinciding with the body insofar it is wholly body and non-expressive –, we experience a form of potentiality that is no longer related to the self-possessed, intentional subject and that is not as yet appropriated by a socially (or pedagogically) legitimate purpose. Consequentially, we might experience individual and social life in such a way that identity and position no longer matter. In this way the possibility of something «new» is opened, i.e.

a future that is not determined by the manner according to which present forms of individual and collective life are ordered.

Relying on Agamben for substantiating my case might, for readers familiar with his political writings, seem an awkward choice, and therefore I will conclude with a small comment on this issue. Agamben famously contends that, since Greek Antiquity, social and political order in the West has been supported by a particular power technique that takes the body as its objective (biopower). More precisely, power operates by separating within human existence the truly humane, unique and meaningful, life (or «bios», the good life) from life that is aimed at survival and (re)production (or «zoé», naked life, the purely physical) (Agamben, 2000, 3-12). Therefore the concentration camp is the paradigm (or «nomos») of western politics. In that sense it might seem bizarre that I, claiming to develop an Agambenian approach, analyze the experience of entirely being «flesh» as emancipatory and educational. Nonetheless, it should be remarked that I am in no way speaking in this context about corporeal life in a *negative* way: I am not defining the body in terms of «merely» corporeal life (i.e. as reduction to the «merely» physical, the ill-valued part of the dualist pair body-mind). On the contrary, what is at stake in my approach is an *affirmative* body-experience. Hence the idea that what we experience during laughter or repetitive exercise is that we are «entirely» flesh. Moreover, Agamben himself argues that the only way to oppose the workings of the bio-centered social power regime that is currently operative precisely consists in an affirmation of life *such as it is* (Agamben, 1999, 238). This concerns a form of existence that no longer allows to define naked life («zoé») in negative terms (i.e. as *just* naked), i.e. allowing a corporeal experience which is beyond or indifferent to the contradistinction between «zoé» and «bios». However, a more profound elaboration of this line of thought will have to be dealt with at another occasion.

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